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ABSTRACT

Identifying many of the goals and objectives of academic administrators can reveal the pervasive impact of speech communication on the potential effectiveness of administration in higher education. Such objectives include (1) disseminating information, (2) engaging in consultation, (3) reaching decisions, (4) discovering information, (5) obtaining advice and counsel, (6) persuading persons and groups, and (7) stimulating intellectual thought. The consulting process probably holds the key to successful shared governance at universities and colleges. Effective consultation involves many critical decisions, such as who will prepare a draft of a solution to an issue, how much time will be allotted, and who will be consulted. Failure to achieve an appropriate balance between consultation and decisiveness is a recurring problem that exemplifies administrative effectiveness. Efforts to reach consensus can sometimes result in general paralysis, while so many groups may respond to issues that decisions remain unmade for long periods of time. Engaging in genuine consultation and trying to accommodate what one hears are important objectives. Given the special competence in understanding and practicing speech communication, faculty members of this discipline can assume leadership roles in faculty and university governance. (HTH)

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PERSPECTIVES ON ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION FROM THE ACADEMIC AFFAIRS LEVEL

Speech Communications Association
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PERSPECTIVES ON ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION FROM THE ACADEMIC AFFAIRS LEVEL

University administrators trace their roots to every conceivable academic discipline. Perhaps the most often-asked question that is raised in informal conversation among administrators is, "What is your academic discipline?" This question is usually followed by, "What led you to an interest in administration?" Those of us who have studied and practiced speech communication know that our academic discipline involves some of the best preparation available for administrative assignments and also that the daily activities of most administrators rely heavily upon special skills and effectiveness in speech communication. Accordingly, whether or not an administrator has educational background and experience in speech communication, administrative effectiveness will often be evaluated by how well the person "manages" speech communication activities and processes.

Management of Speech Communication

Identifying many of the goals and objectives of academic administrators and how speech communication helps to achieve these goals and objectives can reveal the pervasive impact of speech communication on the potential effectiveness of administration in higher education. While a short, definitive list might facilitate general recall, it is probably more appropriate to review a relatively long list of goals and objectives and thus develop a better sense and appreciation of the pervasiveness of our discipline. No effort to prioritize has been made. The reader will see different strengths and significance for each item discussed.

Disseminating Information. This is the broadest objective and one that underlies virtually all communication. It includes the recruiting activities of an admissions officer: instructional activities; reports to a faculty senate, an administrative council, a community advisory committee, and a board of regents or trustees; and development activities of fund-raising and reporting. Naturally, the list is limitless.

Engaging in Consultation. The future of shared governance at an institution rests upon the proper conduct of this function. Special comments will be devoted to the consultation process in the next section of this paper.

Reaching Decisions. Problem-solving tasks are many and continuous. Skills in both small and large group communication, combined with informed and rational thought, are essential for pursuing consensus or at least majority agreement. Faculty members in speech communication are often called upon to lend their skills to the work of essential governing bodies at institutions of higher education, such as task forces, faculty senates, university advisory committees, bargaining teams, grievance committees, and others.

Conducting Evaluations. This is used primarily for sanctioning purposes, both positive and negative. We evaluate one another for promotion, tenure, reappointment, and merit salary increases. We also conduct academic program reviews that identify strengths and concerns. These are some of our principal ways of ensuring quality control of staff and programs, and we often find it easier and more productive to conduct personnel evaluations and to convey special concerns about academic programs on an oral basis. Negative statements committed to writing are usually preceded by lengthy oral discussions.

Discovering Information. This objective is particularly useful when additional information about job candidates or committee appointments is needed. A telephone call or a private visit can reveal information that a person may

prefer not to place in writing. There are also occasions when the "real" reasons for a given action are part of a hidden or political agenda; this information can best be discovered by speech communication.

Obtaining Advice and Counsel. When a particularly difficult or sensitive issue arises, we sometimes contact a person whose views we value highly or whose support we may eventually need. We may also call a trusted friend to ask for advice about a new job opportunity. Once more, the possible topics are limitless. This objective is similar to the consultation process but more informal in nature.

Sponsoring Ceremonial Events. Commencements; honors convocations; banquets for student awards, outstanding teachers, and visiting dignitaries; and expressions of appreciation at a reception or luncheon for faculty senates, special task forces, and university committees are all examples of the numerous occasions when speech communication is utilized for ceremonial events.

Building Rapport. Efforts to ease communication and to build good feelings among faculty, administration, students, and community citizens are often the principal objectives of luncheons before football games, faculty and staff receptions at the Chancellor's or President's house, and other events where no specialized agenda is necessary.

Enforcing Time, Place, and Manner Rules. University rules governing civil dissent were pushed to their breaking point during the free speech movement at Berkeley and the nationwide protests of the Viet Nam war. There are, however, many institutions that now have a relatively clear understanding of which activities involve the protected dissent of constitutional free speech and which ones call for appropriate intervention by authorities. The rules that govern free speech on the campus were developed and tested under fire.

Persuading Persons and Groups. Failure in achieving this objective can be extremely costly to the survival and development of an institution. Effective persuasion is the key to recruiting students, faculty, and staff; to obtaining operating, salary, and capital funds from legislative appropriation committees; to receiving governing board approval for new academic programs and a host of other institutional activities; to raising funds from private sources; and to presenting a quality image of concern and effectiveness to an institution's many publics.

Stimulating Intellectual Thought. Universities usually go beyond the intellectual exchanges of the classroom and the research laboratory to the sponsoring of various forums, visiting lecturers, and other programs that foster an active intellectual environment.

Developing Mutual Trust. The opportunities for increasing mutual trust are usually facilitated by increasing the number of communications transmitted. More frequent contacts between the administration and students or between the administration and faculty should increase mutual trust, provided that the contacts represent attempts to cooperate rather than compete. Additional comments on this objective should probably be reserved for a separate paper.

Preventing a Written Record. There are occasions when a person would prefer not to put a recommendation, decision, or evaluation in writing. Whether it is appropriate to utilize speech communication for this purpose is often debated, but there are certainly many occasions when such a practice is followed.

Engaging in Consultation

As indicated above, the consultation process probably holds the key to successful shared governance at universities and colleges. We need to remind ourselves that the principal reasons for engaging in consultation far transcend

the political objective of being able to say that we consulted. It is out of the testing of ideas by competent colleagues that better decisions develop. Unfortunately, individual pride of authorship often causes an unusually high regard for our own thoughts, producing decisions based more on individual ego than on the combined good sense of informed and competent participants. Consultation is an indispensable step in the search for the best ideas. In addition, genuine consultation helps build a commitment among participants that can lead to consensus or at least to a willingness of persons to go along with a decision that doesn't satisfy everyone. To engage in effective consultation, an administrator needs to be alert to several critical questions, the answers to which will determine whether or not shared governance is a respected and genuine process at the institution. Understanding the various alternatives to each question and making the correct choices for a given issue can prevent many serious problems from developing during and after the consultation process.

1. <u>Is it better to ask the person or group to prepare an original draft of a solution to the issue, or to respond to an administrative draft</u>? There are occasions when time requirements or other motivations cause an administrator to enter the consultation process with a policy or plan of action that is virtually final and open to little if any change, or at the other extreme of having no preconceived plan developed at all. Persons being consulted should be told the extent to which they are expected to initiate policy or to suggest changes in an administrative proposal. In addition, a task force or committee that is asked to initiate a proposal should also be informed of some of the

alternatives and anticipated outcomes. Such a discussion can prevent a great deal of confusion and later questions about the genuineness of the request.

2. Is it better to ask the person or group to prepare a recommendation for administrative review or to make a decision which the administration intends to follow? In many instances, this question is already answered in a regent bylaw, a trustee or administrative policy, or a college constitution. Have you appointed a selection or a screening committee for a new appointment? Is the decision by a faculty grade appeal committee a final decision or can it be appealed to the administration? Are the recommendations of some committees tantamount to a final decision because of historical practice? I have seen considerable anger develop when a committee decision, which was thought to be final, was suddenly overruled or revised by an administrator. I have also seen administrators hide behind committee recommendations instead of acknowledging the administrative decision to support a given recommendation and then accepting responsibility for it. Clarifying the answers to these questions at the outset of the consultative process can do much to minimize at least two tensions: (1) who has the power to make what decision, and (2) what use of our outcomes can we expect to see?

3. How much time should be set aside for completing the process? Can the issue be treated by a brief telephone call or a chance passing in the hallway, or does it require long meetings conducted over a substantial period of time? Devoting little time to major

issues or substantial time to minor issues are sure ways to reduce confidence in administrative judgment. Given the diversity of opinion that exists on issues and the time that should be devoted to them, criticism of the length of time can usually be expected.

4. How many persons or groups should be consulted? Oftentimes a faculty senate constitution or a collective bargaining agreement will specify the answer to this question, but there are many additional situations which rely upon the judgment of the administrator. As a general rule, inclusion is usually better than exclusion, but dangers exist at both extremes.
5. Should the contacts be made by a telephone call, a conference call, a teleconference meeting on closed-circuit television, an individual face-to-face meeting, a committee meeting, or a campus convocation? Many of these forms of contact may be utilized over a span of time on the same issue.
6. Should the consultation occur with individuals, departmental faculty, college-level committees, or university-wide bodies? A given issue may call for participation at all of the above levels, but some can be resolved at only one level. Omitting a level which expected to be consulted, such as not including college faculty representatives on a search committee for a new dean, can produce considerable controversy. Or involving a level of committee that does not have codified authority to deal with a given issue can also lead to charges of improper consultation.

7. Should the consultation follow normal procedures or should a special ad hoc process be developed? Normal procedures are usually specified in laws, constitutions, contracts, administrative policy manuals, and faculty handbooks. Ad hoc procedures usually are developed when special committees or task forces are appointed.

In practice, the answers to these questions are often sorted out by an administrator in relatively quick order. The alternatives identified, however, are quite critical to the conduct of successful consultation, which in turn can have a major impact on faculty respect for administration and the process of shared governance.

Some Recurring Failures

Each of the objectives described in the first part of this paper can be analyzed in the same detail as the consultative process, and various recurring failures in the application of the objectives could be identified for each one. This section, however, will not attempt to present a long list of such failures. All of us could probably identify many examples of success and failure in each of these objectives at our and other institutions. What is presented are several brief examples of the most troublesome failures that occur in the consultation process, ones selected to illustrate ineffective use of speech communication and also misuse of the process.

Failure to achieve an appropriate balance between consultation and decisiveness is a recurring problem that exemplifies administrative ineffectiveness. Each of us likes to think that we know when consultation should begin and when a decision should be made. but faculty, administrative, and student views often differ widely on how these processes should be implemented at a university.

Budget-cutting is a case in point. Many persons prefer to postpone the decision indefinitely, hoping that somehow any cut can be averted. Others want the cut to occur immediately. Upper level administrators usually deal with numbers on a sheet of paper; lower level administrators usually deal with colleagues who are officed next door. It is not uncommon for upper administration to announce a mandated number of positions that need to be eliminated, but then find it necessary to backoff from the original decision as it undergoes the testing of the consultation process. The time set aside for consultation and decision will vary not only by the size and nature of the reduction, but also by the potential agreement or disagreement that exists among the various constituencies. Oftentimes, an effort to reach consensus can result in a general paralysis, where decisions are left unmade until the passage of time eliminates most alternatives or the entrance of another person or group results in a mandated, hasty selection of an alternative not preferred by anyone.

There are also times when a given issue is responded to by so many consultative groups or individuals that the decision-loop simply remains unclosed for extended periods of time. Finding the optimum balance between consultation and decisiveness represents a continuous search for administrative effectiveness.

Equating consultation with consensus is an example of the misuse of speech communication. Thus, some administrators will try to cover their own decision with a mantle of agreement and consensus by indicating that widespread consultations were conducted with faculty, staff, and students. Engaging in genuine consultation and trying to accommodate what one hears are important objectives. When they are subverted by the persons who consult merely to

legitimize their decisions by saying they have consulted, then respect for the person who engages in this practice usually drops quickly.

Given their special competence in understanding and practicing speech communication, faculty members of this discipline can assume leadership roles in faculty and university governance. Most importantly, they can develop their own discipline or department as a model of effective use of speech communication, or they can develop a level of personal competence that will prompt other faculty members and administrators to seek out their participation and leadership in campus governance and administrative assignments. Clearly, administrative effectiveness often will be determined by how well speech communication activities are conducted at a university.